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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study that tested the validity of Kerr's 1964 model of school board socialization. Central hypothesis of the study was Kerr's finding that, over time, novice school board members assign increasingly more responsibility to district administrators. Data were generated primarily through stratified interviews with 40 novice board members from a stratified random sample of 20 school systems in the province of Ontario. Data were collected on (1) the structure and process of school board member socialization, and (2) the ecological structure (i.e., the distribution and diversity of population) of school systems. Contrary to the hypothesis, analysis of the data showed that novice members reported expectations of a lesser administrator role over time. Also, contrary to Kerr's conceptualization, the study found that the role definitions of novice board members did not converge with those of administrators over time, but rather with those of experienced board members. (Author/JG)

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THE SOCIALIZATION OF SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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THE SOCIALIZATION OF SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Socialization is the process by which individuals selectively acquire the values and attitudes, interests and dispositions, skills and knowledge--this is, the culture--current in the group of which they are members.¹ It is, in other words, the process by which novice members become role incumbents.

Like any ongoing social system, the school board operates on the basis of shared values and expectations regarding acceptable system-relevant beliefs, behavior, and action. In the case of a novice school board member, he is only nominally a member until such time as he develops an established involvement² in the work and life of that social system that is the school board. Such involvement is dependent upon the acquisition, although not necessarily the internalization and assimilation, of the role expectations and orientations commonly shared and valued by the other incumbents.

The socialization of school board members has consequences for both the individual and the board. Variable socialization may be understood to set the inputs of conformity and deviance whereby individuals relate to the system and the system integrates and absorbs new members. If the school board is to function as a cohesive and purposive social system, the novice members who join it must be absorbed and integrated so as to minimize disruption of established operating practices and to maximize the core values, expectations, incentives, and sanctions. For the novice member, his personal effectiveness and satisfaction are closely linked to the extent to which he adjusts and adapts to his recently acquired role. How both the

novice member and the ongoing system mutually cope affects the style, tone, and content of school board decision-making.

Despite the obvious theoretical and practical significance of the school board member socialization phenomenon, it remains a virtually unresearched domain. Only one study, that reported by Kerr³ more than a decade ago, has dealt with board member socialization as a central concern. Kerr's analysis, which was intended as a hypothesis-generating rather than a hypothesis-testing endeavor, was based on observations and interviews carried out in 1962-63 in two suburban school systems. An essential finding with respect to board member socialization was that over time the role expectations of novice members--especially those relating to the division of labor and responsibility between the counter-positions of school board and chief school administrator--tended to converge toward those expectations as defined by the chief administrators. This convergence, he inferred, was the outcome of a fairly well prescribed and institutionalized socialization process in which both the chief administrators and experienced board members were active agents of socialization. In like manner, Kerr claimed, norms were transmitted to novice members.

There is a critical lack of empirical research on the process of school board member socialization and a total absence of investigations either confirming or rejecting Kerr's findings, although he himself cautioned that they were not generalizable because of the setting and methodology of his study. Consequently, ever since the publication of Kerr's findings in 1964, scholars and practitioners have tended to uncritically accept his model as the prototype of board member socialization.

In the present study, we attempted to test empirically one central hypothesis generated from Kerr's model: that is, in specifying the division of responsibility between the school board and chief school administrator counter-positions, novice board members will, over time, assign increasingly more responsibility to the administrator position. In addition, we attempted to ascertain information about the existence of school board norms and their transmission to novice members. The data were generated primarily by means of structured interviews with forty novice board members in a stratified random sample of twenty school systems in the province of Ontario.

Kerr's Model

The case study of two suburban school systems was undertaken by Kerr in order to explore several facets of the context and internal structure of school boards that intervene between the socioeconomic background of their members and their attitudes and performance. He found that under conditions which he saw as not uncommon, school boards chiefly perform the function of legitimating the policies of the school system to the community, rather than representing the community to the school.

The model that Kerr constructed was by no means a pattern model that presented a cognitive map of the relations among variables. Rather, it is a graphic device to indicate those inherent features of school boards that predispose them to accept the chief school administrator's definitions of situations--and thereby become agencies of legitimation. The main features are: (1) the nature of school board politics; (2) pressures for conformity throughout the process of socialization on the board; (3) community pressures

generated by the school system's impact on the public. The first two features of school systems are most pertinent to the socialization of novice members.

It was Kerr's reasoning that the nature of school politics is characterized by a relative absence of clear-cut constituencies and by a lack of a familiarity on the part of non-incumbent candidates with school board activities and the educational program. Parenthetically, the persistence of this set of conditions is documented in recent research on school board member recruitment conducted by Cistone⁴ and by Zeigler and Jennings.⁵ Because the absence of visible constituencies freed them from community constraints, Kerr maintained, novice members were highly receptive to the pressures for conformity exerted by experienced members and administrators. Unfamiliarity with activities and programs reinforced reliance on the administrator and his definition of the situation. Pressures for compliance and consensus were powerful from the time of the earliest contacts of the novice members with school authorities. Induction and later socialization were designed to minimize disruption of established norms and practices and maximize the responsibility of the administrator in the division of labor between the school board and administrator counter-positions.

The model that Kerr developed, it should be noted, dealt explicitly with the socialization of the board by the administrator. The emphasis is on the manner in which the novice member comes to adopt the role expectations and orientations for his own position that, while they may be held by other board members, are largely defined by the chief administrator. Conspicuously overlooked in the model, unfortunately, is the reciprocal influence dynamic that operates in every social system.

Procedures

Data for the present study were collected on two major sets of variables: (1) the structure and process of school board member socialization and (2) the ecological structure (i.e., the distribution and diversity of the population) of school systems. The sources of data and the methods of collection differed for each set of variables.

The data on the structure and process of socialization were generated by means of structured interviews with forty novice board members in a stratified random sample of twenty school systems in the province of Ontario. To obtain the sample, all public school systems in the province were categorized on the basis of given geographical areas in order to eliminate geographical bias in the selection. Two stratification criteria were used in drawing subsamples from each of the geographical areas: (1) the population of the school system and (2) the ecological structure of the school system.⁶ Since at least two novice members had been elected in each of the twenty school systems in the study, two respondents could be drawn from each. Where more than two had been elected, the two respondents were chosen randomly.

Since the study of in-role socialization is a longitudinal concern, a multi-wave panel design was employed over a period of twenty-four months, which coincided with one full term of office. (Ontario school board elections are held biennially.) The novice members were interviewed during their first month in office (t_1), at mid-term (t_2), and during the last month of their term (t_3). The first interview was conducted face to face; the second and third interviews were conducted by telephone. The same structured interview schedule was administered in all three interviews. In addition, after the

fourth, eighth, sixteenth, and twentieth month, each subject submitted a brief personal analysis (not more than five hundred words in length) of his or her perceived socialization experiences. The personal analyses served the manifest function of providing a rich and revealing source of information beyond that of the structured interviews and also served the latent function of maintaining the subjects' sense of involvement in the study and sense of the researchers' continued interest in them. Over the twenty-four-month period the panel remained intact, and all forty subjects completed the study.

The structured interview schedule, which was pretested on a small sample of school board candidates and incumbents, tapped three types of information: (1) general background data such as sex, age, occupation, education, income, social class, prior experience in public and political affairs, organizational affiliations, and so on; (2) data on the structure and process of school board member socialization, including the respondents' perceptions of the school board member role, of the norms and role definitions of the school board, of the sources of cues regarding behavior and voting, and so on; and (3) data on their perceptions and assessments of their school board experiences and the effects that their school board service had on their income, occupation, career, prestige, influence, social relationships, and so on. Each subject was interviewed individually, and the interviews normally ran for a period of roughly seventy-five to ninety minutes.

Incorporated in the interview schedule was a role definition instrument that was intended to serve as the operational measure of novice role expectations relating to the critical relationship between the school board and chief administrator counter-positions. The instrument was an adaptation of the "Division of Labor Instrument" used in the role analysis study conducted

by Gross, Mason, and McEachern.⁷ It contained thirteen items describing some general functions carried out in the school system and presented four alternatives from which the respondents could express a preference. The items related to general administration, personnel, curriculum and instruction, finance and long-range planning, community relations, and policy initiation. Response alternatives for the items, although varied slightly for each item (according to its content), may be paraphrased as follows:

- (1) should be entirely the responsibility of the school board;
- (2) should be largely the responsibility of the school board;
- (3) should be largely the responsibility of the chief administrator;
- (4) should be entirely the responsibility of the chief administrator.

The respondents were asked to answer according to what they felt the division of labor and responsibility between a school board and the chief administrator should be ideally. The responses to the items were considered to be role expectations relating to the relationship between the school board and chief administrator counter-positions (rather than to either position alone).

The "Division of Labor Instrument" and related summary information are extensively treated by Gross and his associates in their role analysis volume. In the present study, coefficient alpha, an internal consistency estimate of reliability the general formula of which Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 is a special case,⁸ was .71, which is high. The estimated average inter-item correlation was .24, which is significant at the .01 level. It was inferred from these measures that the role definition instrument was one that provided satisfactory reliability and validity by conventional criteria.⁹

A variety of approaches can be pursued in order to ascertain information and attitudes regarding school board norms. In one study of norms in state legislatures, Wahlke and his colleagues¹⁰ employed an open-ended question that asked respondents to identify the "rules of the game" in their respective state legislatures. While this approach is well suited for identifying those norms perceived as most salient to experienced legislators, it may fail to elicit the emergent attitudes that are held by novices early in their legislative careers. A more suitable approach for our purposes is one suggested by Asher¹¹ in his study of members of Congress. In that study "freshmen" and experienced members were queried about specific norms, such as specialization, reciprocity, courtesy, and the learning of the rules of the system. Moreover, the questions seeking to uncover information about norms were framed within a fairly specific behavioral situation. For example, reciprocity was operationalized in his study by placing it in the context of a voting situation, "with all the attendant ambiguities and pressures." The actual question was: "Would you vote a certain way on a bill that you cared little about in order to gain the vote of a fellow representative on a bill that you did care about?"

Similarly, in this study of school board member socialization, we attempted to frame our questions regarding school board norms so that they were as behaviorally oriented as possible. For example, inquiring into the norm of courtesy, we asked: "Would you ever personally criticize a fellow board member in public?" The norms investigated in this study were friendly relationships, courtesy, school board rules, committee work, and reciprocity (trading votes).

Since the concept of socialization involves the notion of normative and mutual expectations and norms that are commonly shared by members of a

group, cross-sectional data were gathered from experienced board members (those serving their second or later term of office) by means of a mail questionnaire, which was an abbreviated and adapted version of the interview schedule. This was mailed in the last month of the study to all experienced members on the boards in the stratified random sample. Of these, 131 board members (73 per cent) returned completed questionnaires. At least a majority of the eligible membership of each board returned completed questionnaires. The demographic characteristics of this group did not differ in any important way from those of the novice sample. At about the same time, the chief school administrator of each of the boards in the sample was also sent a mail questionnaire, which was an adapted version of that completed by the experienced board members. All the administrators returned the completed questionnaires.

The structural data on the school systems were collected from a variety of sources and provided a bank of information on the social, economic, and political characteristics of school systems in Ontario. Particularly useful were federal, provincial, municipal, and school system records and documents.

Specification of the school systems under consideration would be incomplete without reference to the nonpartisan nature of municipal and school board elections in Ontario. A nonpartisan election is one in which no political party label appears on the ballot and candidates are nominated by a simple petition process. All municipalities and school systems in the province share this contextual characteristic.

Findings

Test of the Hypothesis

It was our hypothesis that in specifying the division of responsibility between the school board and chief administrator counter-positions, novice board members will, over time, assign increasingly more responsibility to the administrator position. In order to determine shifts over time in role definitions, repeated measures analysis of variance¹² was done on the grand mean scores (all items combined) on the "Division of Labor Instrument" that was administered to each of the subjects at t_1 , t_2 , and t_3 .

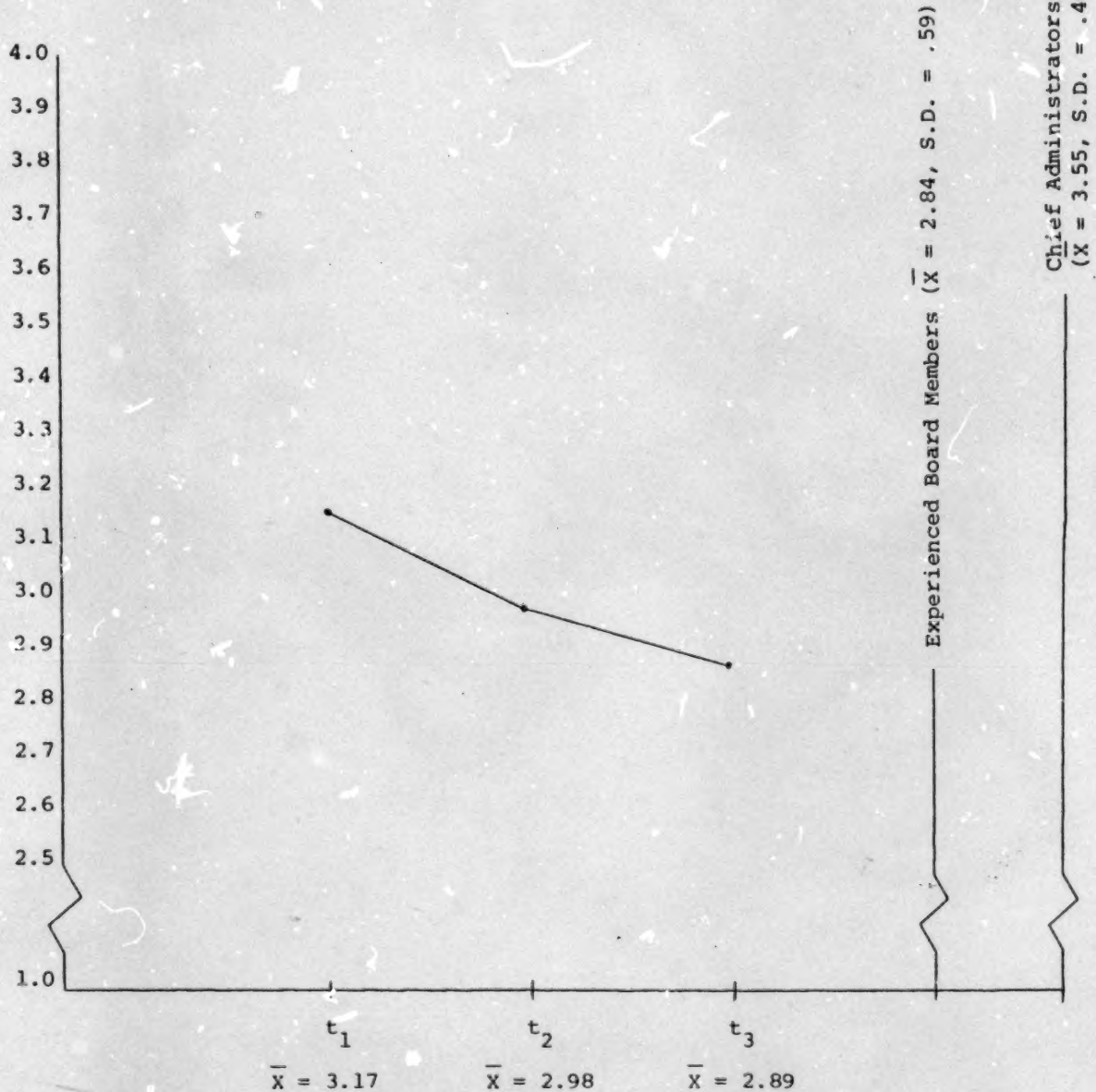
Contrary to our hypothesis, as represented in Figure 1 there is a statistically significant downward trend ($F = 5.81$, $p < .01$) over time in the mean scores of the novice members. That is, over time the novice members reported expectations for a lesser administrator role in the division of labor and responsibility between the board and administrator positions.

It should be noted that, even with this declining trend, the novice members at t_3 held expectations for a substantial administrator role. Experienced members recorded lower mean scores ($\bar{X} = 2.84$) than the novice members, indicating a slightly lesser administrator role, but the difference between the two mean scores was not statistically significant. By comparison, the chief administrators demonstrated expectations for not only a substantial administrator role but a decidedly dominant one ($\bar{X} = 3.55$).

Clearly there is disagreement between the two sets of role definers--incumbents of the school board member position (novice and experienced members) and incumbents of the chief school administrator position--with

FIGURE 1

MEAN SCORES ON DIVISION OF LABOR INSTRUMENT^a



^aA mean score approaching 4.00 indicates an expectation for a greater administrator role in the division of responsibility. A mean score approaching 1.00 indicates an expectation for a greater school board role in the division of responsibility.

regard to dominance in the assignment of responsibility. The disagreement between the two sets of role definers is mentioned here only in passing, inasmuch as the present study was not concerned with the analysis of their interposition consensus. Of more central importance to this study is the finding that over time the role definitions of novice members do not converge toward those of the administrators in the sample, but rather toward those of experienced members. By the end of their first term of office (two years), novice members have come to share the role definitions of their more experienced colleagues, at least with regard to the division of labor and responsibility between the board and administrator counter-positions.

Related Findings

In addition to the test of the hypothesis, we inquired into some informal school board norms, or "rules of the game." Several conceptions may be found in the literature of the social and psychological disciplines regarding the existence and transmission of the informal norms of a social system. All hold that a social system must transmit its norms to novice members in order to ensure the continued, orderly operation of the system; and that a novice member must learn these norms if he is to be a fully functioning, integrated, and effective member of the system. Whether or not this is necessary in all cases, it is plausible to expect that novice school board members undergo a socialization process--however formalized or institutionalized--whereby they come to learn the informal norms of school board work and life.

The strategy that we employed to study the learning of board norms by novice members was described earlier. The norms investigated were

friendly relationships, courtesy, school board procedural rules, committee work, and reciprocity (trading votes).¹³

Table 1 presents the level of agreement expressed by our sample of experienced board members to the series of items about board norms.

TABLE 1
EXPERIENCED MEMBERS' ATTITUDES TO THE NORMS

Norm	% Agreeing (N=131)
Friendly relationships important	96
Would not personally criticize a fellow board member	93
Board procedural rules important	89
Important work of the board done in committee	90
Reciprocity (trading votes) acceptable	84

The level of agreement expressed is relatively high for all the norms; but since a definitional attribute of a norm is that it be shared to a high degree by members of the group or system, this level of agreement is understandable.

The highest level of agreement was reached on the importance of friendly relationships, and the next highest on refraining from personal criticism. The weakest consensus was found on the norm of reciprocity (trading votes). Although a detailed analysis of the responses to each of the items would be most illuminating, such an analysis is simply not possible within the confines of this presentation. Suffice it to say that it appears that the norms related to interpersonal relationships seem to be

somewhat more binding on experienced board members than the norms related to the routines and procedures of board operation.

Table 2 presents the level of agreement expressed by novice board members at t_1 to the same norm questions asked of the experienced members. In general, the responses of the novice members are similar to those of the experienced members, suggesting a shared set of expectations.

TABLE 2
NOVICE MEMBERS' ATTITUDES TO THE NORMS AT t_1

Norm	% Agreeing (N=40)
Friendly relationships important	98
Would not personally criticize a fellow board member	95
Board procedural rules important	90
Important work of the board done in committee	80
Reciprocity (trading votes) acceptable	88

The highest level of agreement among the novice members was reached on the importance of friendly relationships, and the next highest on refraining from personal criticism. Consensus on these two norms between the two groups of respondents is very strong. The weakest consensus among novice members concerned the locus of the most important work of the board, whether in committees or in regular sessions of the board. One reasonable explanation of this finding is that novice members at t_1 were unable to know where the most important work of the board was done because of their unfamiliarity with its work pattern.

Nonetheless, the most striking fact that emerges in Table 2 is that at t_1 novice members were already closely attuned to the norms shared by experienced members (Table 1). If learning is defined in terms of attitude change, there is little learning that could be expected after t_1 because of the nature of the novice members' responses at t_1 . Table 3 presents the level of agreement expressed by novice members on each norm at t_1 , t_2 , and t_3 .¹⁴ It shows that consensus on the norms decreased in three cases, increased in one case, and remained unchanged in one case. In general, however, the changes were very slight and consequently may be regarded as insignificant. Put another way, consensus on the norms was fairly stable over time.

Such consensus notwithstanding, Table 3 does reveal that the t_3 novice members' responses were somewhat closer to the responses of the experienced members than their t_1 responses. Therefore, it may be inferred that while the novice members at t_1 were similar to the experienced members, their views toward the norms were even closer at t_3 . Apparently, at least some socialization toward the norms was occurring at t_3 , although not very much.

The data generated in this study also revealed some modalities in the structure of school board member socialization that are at variance with conventional notions. Adapting the analytical framework advanced by Cogswell¹⁵ for the comparative analysis of socialization systems, we were attentive to three structural properties that might be expected to influence the course of socialization--novice-agent relationships, socialization settings, and some structural properties of roles that serve as targets of socialization. Our analysis was restricted to the central tendencies in the data rather than the dispersion around the central tendencies.

TABLE 3
LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH NORMS AT t_1 , t_2 AND t_3

Norm	Novice Members (N=40)			Experienced Members (N=131)	
	% Agreeing t_1	% Agreeing t_2	% Agreeing t_3	Change t_1 to t_3	% Agreeing
Friendly relationships important	98	98	95	-3	96
Would not personally criticize a fellow board member	95	88	90	-5	93
Board procedural rules important	90	93	85	-5	89
Important work of the board done in committee	80	88	93	13	90
Reciprocity (trading votes) acceptable	88	90	88	0	84

In terms of the novice-agent relationship, novice members are largely instrumental in their own socialization inasmuch as they view their school board role as an extension of preincumbency roles. Certain roles, skills, expectations, and experiences from the preincumbency period prepare the novice member for his new role and ease his transition into it.¹⁶ The potency of this notion is evident in the findings above that indicate that novice members were socialized into the norms prior to joining the board. Under such conditions it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify formal agents of socialization from among contemporary role incumbents, either board members or administrators.

Likewise, the socialization setting is highly informal and random. Socialization into the school board role does not involve an institutionalized period of overemphasis. There is no major device or specialized arrangements for mediated entry into the role. Except for a conference for newly elected members that was sponsored by the provincial school boards association, there was no systematic program for socialization in our sample of subjects. However, since novice members viewed their new role as an extension of preincumbent roles (especially those related to occupational and community service experiences), there was no perceived need for a formalized setting within which socialization would take place.

In terms of the structural properties of the school board member role, perhaps the most salient feature is that it is a role entered into voluntarily. As such, Cogswell hypothesizes, there is affective attachment to it before the individual achieves proficiency in role skills. This is contrasted with roles entered involuntarily, in which individuals are seen to become proficient in role skills before they make an affective

attachment between self and role (such as the case of paraplegics). Moreover, socialization into the school board member roles falls almost exclusively on expressive elements as against instrumental elements.¹⁷

The amount of socialization, Etzioni wrote,¹⁸ depends on the degree to which organizational behavior differs from behavior that participants have learned elsewhere. Given the extent to which novice board members draw upon preincumbent experience, the amount of socialization into the new role is virtually nil. The lack of norm learning demonstrated by our sample of novice members may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that when they joined the school board they were already well socialized into the role as a consequence of recruitment,¹⁹ preincumbent experience, and anticipatory socialization.

Concluding Comments

For more than a decade now, scholars and practitioners have tended to uncritically accept received notions about the structure and process of school board member socialization. The findings of this study call into question these received notions.

Contrary to Kerr's conceptualization, we found that over time the role definitions of novice board members do not converge toward those of administrators, but rather toward those of experienced board members. Moreover, we found board member socialization neither well prescribed nor well institutionalized, as Kerr had hypothesized. In general, there was no major device or specialized arrangements for mediated entry into the role.

Moreover, it was found that the amount of norm learning by novice board members during their first term of office was minimal. Evidently, novice members shared the norms of the system even before they entered it. Accordingly, it is difficult if not impossible to identify formal agents of socialization from among contemporary role incumbents, either board members or administrators. There is strong evidence that roles, skills, expectations, and experiences from the preincumbency period prepare the novice member for his new role and ease his transition into it. By way of emphasis, we reiterate that the lack of norm learning demonstrated by our sample may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that when they joined the school board they were already well socialized into the role as a consequence of recruitment, preincumbent experience, and anticipatory socialization.

Postscript

Of the forty novice board members in our sample, thirty-three ran for re-election for a second term. Twenty-six were re-elected (five by acclamation); seven were defeated.

Notes

¹Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (Rev. ed.; Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957).

²Amitai Etzioni, A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations (New York: Free Press, 1961).

³Norman D. Kerr, "The School Board as an Agency of Legitimation," Sociology of Education, XXXVIII (Fall, 1964), 34-59.

⁴Peter J. Cistone, "School Board Member Recruitment: The Case of Ontario," Journal of Educational Administration, XII (October, 1974), 42-56.

⁵L. Harmon Zeigler and M. Kent Jennings, Governing American Schools (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1974).

⁶The index of ecological structure that was used in the research project of which this analysis is a part is described in Peter J. Cistone, "The Ecological Basis of School Board Member Recruitment," Education and Urban Society, VI (August, 1974), 428-50.

⁷Neal Gross, Ward S. Mason, and Alexander W. McEachern, Explorations in Role Analysis (New York: Wiley, 1958).

⁸Lee J. Cronbach, "Coefficient Alpha and the Internal Structure of Tests," Psychometrika, XVI (September, 1951), 297-334.

⁹J. P. Guilford, Fundamental Statistics in Psychology and Education (4th ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 481.

¹⁰John C. Wahlke et al., The Legislative System (New York: Wiley, 1962).

¹¹Herbert B. Asher, "The Freshman Congressman: A Developmental Analysis" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1970); reported later in Herbert B. Asher, "The Learning of Legislative Norms," American Political Science Review, LXVII (June, 1973), 499-513.

¹²B. J. Winer, Statistical Principles in Experimental Design (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962).

¹³The actual question for each of the norms was: How important do you think it is to maintain friendly relationships with your school board colleagues? Would you ever personally criticize a fellow board member in public? How important do you think it is to learn the procedural rules of the board? Do you think that the most important work of the board is done in committees or in regular sessions of the board? Would you vote a certain way on a matter that you cared little about in order to gain the vote of a fellow board member on a matter you did care about? These questions are similar to those framed in the Asher study (see note 11).

¹⁴Percentages in this table are for novice members in the aggregate. A zero per cent change then does not necessarily mean that all novice members interviewed at t_1 , t_2 , and t_3 remained perfectly stable; shifts in one direction may have balanced out those in the other.

¹⁵Betty E. Cogswell, "Some Structural Properties Influencing Socialization," Administrative Science Quarterly, XIII (December, 1968), 417-40.

¹⁶This hypothesis is developed in the case of city councilmen in Kenneth Prewitt, The Recruitment of Political Leaders (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970).

¹⁷Etzioni, Complex Organizations, pp. 141-150.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁹For a discussion of recruitment and socialization as highly interrelated stages in the evolution of a school board member role incumbent, see Peter J. Cistone, "The Recruitment and Socialization of School Board Members," in Understanding School Boards, ed. by Peter J. Cistone (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1975), pp. 47-61.